Rich Man, Poor Man!

By KEITH GORDON

Before they reached the first ledge overlooking Sausalito a mist like floating globules of crushed pearl rolled noiselessly through the fissures of the hills and blotted out the village, the bay and the towers and chimneys of San Francisco—in other words, the world. In the damp air the girl's hair curled more distractingly than ever. Never had he seen it when it framed the low forehead in so bewildering an arabesque of rings and curves and waves.

"You look rather swell yourself," she laughed in response to his eloquent glance of approval. "Knickers and a Norfolk cap and the jacket aren't half bad on you. Taken in connection with your cleft chin," she went on, throwing her head back and screwing up her eyes critically, "they make you a very presentable youth indeed."

"We won't talk about that," was the terse reply. "This walk to Point Bonita has an object."

She opened her eyes wide.

"Certainly," she assented politely. "Point Bonita, for instance. If it has any other object," she went on sternly, "if you're going back to that old subject, I won't go a step farther."

By this time they were moving in the midst of a cloud.

It was his turn to be innocent.

"You mean—oh," with a fine imitation of impatience, "doesn't a girl ever forget it if a fellow has once happened to fancy himself in love with her and said so?"

The pink of the girl's cheeks—it had the soft, furred look that is responsible for the slang adjective "peachy"—deepened suddenly, unaccountably. Out of the tail of his eye the youth observed this interesting fact with cruel glee, reflecting with a pang that he should have chosen diplomacy as a vocation instead of engineering.

"You should forgive and forget the sins of my youth," he resumed. "You know you insisted that you would always be the best of friends, and that's what I need now!"

"You change quickly enough, I must say!" she remarked with some heat. "It isn't six months since"—

"Since what?" he challenged. But she turned away and did not reply, while the walls of mist lazily closed in nearer and nearer.

"What do you want to tell me?" she questioned at last in an oddly subdued manner. He did not answer immediately, but swung on ahead of her in the narrow path as if he were making a way for her through the mist. So he had got over his love for her. She felt a shuddering sense of desolation. Still, she argued, she could scarcely have supposed he would go on caring, especially since she had explained to him with judicial carefulness that she must marry a man with money on account of her mother and the younger girls.

Strangely enough, though she had pictured herself as married to another, there had always been a somber, interesting figure hovering in the background of that picture, one to whom she meant to be so kind, so gentle, so all sweet, that his regret should become like a beautiful, sad song—to be wept over and enjoyed. And now the brute was asking her to "forgive and forget" that he had ever told her that he loved her!

They had reached the summit of a hill, and he proposed that they sit down upon a convenient bowlder to rest before attempting the next one. Apparently her silence was unnoticed.

"You see, fate's been telling off my buttons lately," he began in a business-like tone, "and the decree is that it has got to be money!"

"What do you mean?"

"Rich woman, poor woman, beggar woman, squaw," he elucidated, touching the buttons on his jacket, "and the lot falls to rich woman every time. It seems a beastly thing to think of—marrying for money. I would be a cad enough to do it, but the thing is that there's a girl—a mighty fine girl—and I really—I—hang it, I like her! But how am I to tell whether it's the real thing or whether her money has something to do with it? You see, there are reasons why I should have money right away, long before I can hope to gain it by my own efforts. The governor is breaking down, and his affairs are in bad shape, and there are the two kids and mother to provide for."

The girl's heart was sinking as the mercury does in a falling temperature. All the joy of living seemed to be oozing away through her finger tips, leaving her cold and luert. He turned toward her curiously.

"Of course you don't think I'd consider such a thing if I were not forced to it by duty!" he went on fervently. "And I came to you because I thought you'd understand, because circumstances are forcing you into the same thing. They say you're going to marry Bradshaw. You'll be a rich woman and a happy one, I hope; but, whether you are or not, you will have done your duty by the family. That will be your consolation, and that's why I come to you in my difficulty. What do you think—can I decently ask the girl to marry me? Remember, I like her, but I'm not sure I love her!"

The fog, which had seemed about to crush them softly a few moments before, was now falling back, but they were still in a remote world. With the very sight of habitations cut off from their view it was hard to believe in the reality of purple and fine linen, horses and carriages and gold. Suddenly the scales fell from the girl's eyes, though she realized with a pang that it was too late. She had put the only thing that mattered out of her life as thoughtlessly and carelessly as she would toss a pebble from her path. She had not even realized what she was doing. Down below, where the Bradshaw fortune cast its glamour, everything had looked different. She had thought that with money all things else must fall into place. But here, cut off from the world, the Bradshaw wealth seemed less than nothing and love the only thing.

Farther and farther the fog receded, showing thin in spots, but still concealing the valley beneath them. But she was very sure now. Even when the world assumed its old proportions it would be the same. She had had her lesson. The peachblow tint was gone from her cheeks, and her eyes were grave and ungirlish as she spoke.

"I'm not going to marry Grant Bradshaw," she said steadily, "nor any other man whom I don't love. So you see I can't help you after all! I don't think I could ever really have meant to do such a thing"—

Her voice broke, and the eyes that had been looking into his with a pleading stronger than any words suddenly filled with tears.

"I'm such a silly," she explained rather unevenly, "but I hate to be accused of such a thing. And I think you ought to be ashamed, Jack! You're a man and you can make money for yourself and"—

But he seemed to be paying no attention to her words. With deep absorption he was naming the buttons of her coat as if he were consulting an oracle.

"Rich man, poor man, beggar man, chief," he chanted. "Doctor, lawyer, merchant, thief. Rich man, poor man!" he stopped, looking anxiously for another button, but there was none there.

"You see!" she gibed triumphantly. "Perhaps you've made a mistake in your own case too." And, with a demure face, she counted the buttons. "Poor woman!" she announced, and then something in his glance brought the bloom back to her face and her head went down upon his shoulder.

The thin places in the fog gave way, leaving two jagged spaces that framed a beautiful picture. Down below the sun was shining on the blue waters of the bay, on the trees and hedges, among which nestled the houses of the town. The girl caught her breath. She felt as if it were a benediction, a revelation of the peace of the years to come.

"But what about our families?" she asked in a troubled voice when the mist had blotted out the pictures once more. He laughed joyously.

"See that?" he said, holding out a brawny right arm.

A Spelling Rule.

At a school inspection some of the boys found a difficulty in the correct placing of the letters "i" and "e" in such words as "believe," "receive," etc., when the inspector said blandly, "My boys, I will give you an infallible rule, one I invariably use myself." The pupils were all attention, and even the master pricked up his ears. The inspector continued: "It is simply this. Write the 'i' and 'e' exactly alike and put the dot in the middle over them."—London Telegraph.

It is not helps, but obstacles; not facilities, but difficulties, that make men.—Mathews.

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